

## CATS'S KARMA

by CHRISTOPHER MOORE

### Chris's Introduction to Cat's Karma

*Back in 1987 I had yet to figure out that I was better at writing funny stories than scary ones. I had been sending horror stories to mainstream magazines who rewarded me with a stack of rejection slips, many of which included a scribbled note: "A little too weird for our readers."*

*My next step was to send these stories out to the men's magazines, who included "horror stories" in their listings in the Writer's Market. Once again I was rewarded with a stack of rejection slips with this note: "You write very well, but we do not publish any stories that do not include at least three explicit sex scenes." (By this time I'd papered most of my bathroom with rejection slips.) Ah-ha! I said. I shall write an erotic fable. Cat's Karma came out of that effort. Actually, after no one accepted the story I cleaned out the explicit sex scenes so I could show this story to my friends without them thinking I was a hopeless horndog, and this version is the end result.*

*Cat's Karma appears [here](#) for the first time ever, anywhere. I think it's pretty rough, but it represents a period in my development as a writer, so I've left it unedited. (Actually, I read that excuse in some other author's book of short stories and it sounded pretty credible and noble. I didn't edit this because I'm lazy.) By the way, if you've read my books you might expect something funny in this story. It isn't there.*

Chang the fisherman was a poor man, but he always worked hard. Too hard, some said. He was the first of the fishermen out to sea in the morning and the last into the market at night. He usually brought in more fish than the other fishermen, but because his were the last in, the fish merchant paid him less for each fish, telling Chang they were worth less because they were not as fresh. Chang persevered in his habits of working longer and harder, for he believed that if it did not benefit him in this lifetime, it would in the next and the fish merchant became richer because of it. Chang, however, always took the best fish of his catch home to share with his cat, Ling-Ling.

Except for the black she-cat, Chang lived alone. Every night he sat by the fire and shared his dinner with Ling-Ling, always giving her the liver of the fish to keep her coat soft and shiny. After dinner he mended his nets. As he worked the rough cord back and forth with the wooden needle, Ling-Ling curled up against his leg and purred. When weariness overtook him he picked up Ling-Ling and carried her to his pallet, where he slept with his face against her fur, breathing in her warmth until morning. Chang loved the black cat. She was the only softness in his life and his only respite from the cold of the sea.

Each morning, hours before dawn, Ling-Ling woke Chang by gently digging her claws through his blanket into his chest, nursing him slowly awake. Chang rose and padded around the house making tea and preparing rice balls and fish for the long day at sea. Ling-Ling walked circles at his feet stretching and rubbing her silky back against his calves as if to remind him that she had not had her breakfast. Before he left, Chang filled a bowl with fish and another with fresh water and set them out for Ling-Ling. He always put out too much and many times returned to find the fish spoiled, but he worried that Ling-Ling would go hungry should a hostile wind make him late.

The people of the village thought Chang quite mad. Cats were not to be kept, but were left to kill

rodents and scavenge garbage for their food. A man Chang's age would have been married long ago if it were not for his silly affection for the black cat. And besides, a man should not work longer to have the fish merchant pay him less. Chang was not only mad, he was simple! Thus they were surprised when Old Kwok, the richest fisherman in the village, approached Chang with a proposition.

"Chang, I have seen you work long and hard only to have your rewards taken by the greed of the fish merchant. Yet still, you never complain and are content within yourself. I have seen how you treat your cat and have thought, 'a man like this should have a family, so that he might teach his children such tenderness and humility.' I have no sons Chang, and that is a tragedy. I would have you as my son. My eldest daughter has come of age and I wish you to marry her. For this you will inherit my four fishing boats and their crews."

Chang accepted at once, for no matter what the villagers thought, he was not simple. Old Kwok's daughter, Mesong, was a legendary beauty, with long hair and rare green eyes. Many suitors had bid for her hand as far back as her fifth birthday, including the fish merchant, who offered the most because he had the most to gain by owning his own fleet of fishing boats. Now, Chang, who had nothing, had won the girl and Old Kwok's boats. The village was shocked. The fish merchant was furious.

The wedding was expensive. The fireworks alone cost more than Chang would have made in a year. Old Kwok beamed through the entire ceremony. At last he had his son. The fish merchant stood to the side twisting the end of his long mustache and occasionally lighting off small skyrockets at any children that came too close. Afterward the village danced Chang and his new bride to the door of his little house and left them.

Chang had never been with a woman before and he was nervous, jabbering and offering his new bride tea and generally making a fool of himself. While Chang babbled, Ling-Ling stood in the corner with her back arched, hissing each time the girl got near.

Mesong's mother had spent long hours teaching Mesong the ways to comfort and care for a man, so she simply put her finger on Chang's lips to quiet him and led to a spot in front of the fire where she slowly undressed him in the flickering orange light. He stood there naked and afraid, the cord-like muscles in his stomach twitching as he watched Mesong undress.

Her gown was of fine green silk, wrapped around her body ten times. She walked around Chang unfurling it as she moved, brushing him lightly on the buttocks or stomach or hips as she passed. As the ninth layer fell Chang could see the silhouette of her body against the fire. He started to reach for her and she gently pushed his arms back to his sides.

"My husband, you do enough on your boat each day, this is for me to do," she said. Then she stepped in front of him and dropped the last layer of silk. She was tiny and small waisted but her breasts were large and the dark brown nipples pointed upward as if held by magic. Her hair fell almost to her knees and as she turned in front of him, showing herself for Chang's approval, her hair brushed across him and he was sure he would die if she did not let him move and take her there in front of the fire.

She put her arms around him, but still would not allow him to move. Her head came only to his chest and she kissed a trail down the center of his stomach, always looking up into his face with her deep green eyes that caught flickers of orange and red in the firelight.

At last Chang could no longer stand it. A low moan rose up out of his chest. He began shaking and she stood and held him until he calmed, then she led him to the pallet and straddled him. Their lovemaking was slow and soft as a lullaby and after a long time they reached to the "little death" together, then in sweet dampness they fell asleep.

Outside, Ling-Ling let out a long scream.

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Chang awoke with his face in his new bride's hair, breathing in her dark warmth. Ling-Ling was scratching at the door and Chang knew it was time to get up. As much as he wished to stay next to Mesong and sleep, he went to the door and let Ling-Ling inside.

Chang began to prepare his tea but soon he felt a small hand over his and Mesong was standing beside him.

"It is not proper that you should prepare your own tea, my husband." She took the kettle from him and placed it on the hearth, then she added wood to the fire.

Chang sat watching her, not quite sure what to do. Ling-Ling rubbed against him to remind him about her breakfast. He started to go for the fish and again Mesong stopped him.

"But I must feed Ling-Ling," he said.

"I will feed Ling-Ling," Mesong said.

"But she does not like you. I have always fed her."

"She will learn to like me when she realizes that we are sisters in your care." With that she took a piece of fish off of the plate and offered it to Ling-Ling, who backed away despite her hunger.

"No matter," said Mesong, "she will soon learn that I am not her enemy."

Chang was confused by the change in his routine so he just sat and shook his head while he watched his new wife prepare the riceballs he was to take to sea. She packed them into his pouch, wished him fair winds and a good catch, and hugged him good-bye.

"Don't worry about Ling-Ling," she said as she waved. "By day's end we will be great friends."

As Chang walked out of the cabin into the chill morning he felt a warmth inside that he had never felt before, and much to his surprise, it stayed with him through the long cold day at sea. When he returned that evening he found Ling-Ling curled up in Mesong's lap purring and eating a piece of fish. Chang joined them in their dinner after which he and Mesong made love in front of the fire while Ling-Ling lay at their side purring.

Chang was more happy than he could ever remember being, so happy in fact, that he forgot to tell Mesong that the fish merchant had given him only half the amount he usually paid for the day's catch.

As the weeks passed Chang and Mesong and Ling-Ling grew closer and closer. Chang regretted the time he spent away from his little family and began to leave later each day and return each evening with the other fishermen, but still the fish merchant paid him less than the others. Mesong begged him to prevail upon her father for help, but Chang was a proud man and refused. At last they decided that Mesong would sell Chang's fish herself while he was at sea each day.

Every morning after Chang left, Mesong slung two large baskets of fish on a pole and carried them down the long road to the market where she hawked the fish to the wives of merchants and craftsmen.

The old fish merchant stood in the market and schemed while he watched Mesong sell her entire load at half his asking price. Although most of his fish were taken inland by cart and sold to farmers, the fish merchant resented the competition in the little fishing village and vowed to take revenge on Chang, who was now his sworn enemy. He smiled and greeted Mesong with a wish of prosperity as she passed.

When a hostile wind took the fishermen far out to sea one evening, the old fish merchant took his revenge.

Mesong had returned home from the market early, having sold her all her fish before noon. When the storm blew up in the afternoon she began to worry about Chang. She sat by the fire holding Ling-Ling in her lap until long after dark when there came a knock at the door. She opened it to find the old fish merchant standing there holding a parcel out to her.

"Excuse the late hour," he said, "but since your husband has not returned this evening I thought you might be in need of something for your supper. It is well known that Chang always keeps the best of his catch for you and the cat. I have brought beef that my men traded for from the inland farmers. Please do me the honor of accepting this small gift in your time of need."

Mesong was mistrustful of the fish merchant. She could have done with cold rice until Chang's return, but Ling-Ling would not eat rice, so for the sake of the cat she accepted the gift with thanks.

"Enjoy, Lady Chang," the old fish merchant said through a grin. "And may your noble husband return soon." With that he was off and Mesong began to prepare the beef over the fire.

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The next morning the wind changed and Chang returned to his home to find Mesong and Ling-Ling dead, lying together in front of the cold fireplace. He fell to his knees over his bride and wept, and that is where Mesong's father found him later that afternoon.

Mesong and the cat had eaten all the beef before its poison killed them so it was thought that they had eaten fish that had gone bad, since Chang had not returned that night with a fresh catch. A huge funeral pyre was built and Mesong was laid upon it dressed in the finest silks. The villagers all gathered and were shocked when they saw the body of the black cat lying at the girl's side, but none said a word. Chang was in enough pain without being ridiculed. Between themselves the villagers talked of the horrible atrocities Chang must have committed in some previous life to have been so punished in this one.

After the funeral Chang returned to his little house alone and lay down on his pallet. Thoughts of Mesong wrenched his heart and he curled into a ball of pain and loneliness -- not even the purring warmth of his cat to comfort him. Sleep would not come. Each time he closed his eyes his head filled with images of his beloved Mesong or the feeling of Ling-Ling's soft fur. He could not make himself eat. For three days he lay on the pallet grieving, getting up only to light a fire and relieve himself. Finally, on the third night he slept and dreamed of Mesong and Ling-Ling, then of Ling-Ling's soft fur, then of Mesong's loving touch, then both together. He dreamed he was awakened by soft fur brushing against his face.

The fire had almost died so he could just see someone standing next to the pallet, a woman, but not a woman. She was covered with soft black fur like Ling-Ling's, but her body was much like Mesong's. The cat woman crawled on to the pallet with Chang, and though he thought that he should be afraid, he felt safe with this soft creature.

She arched her back beside him, pressing her full furred breasts into his side. He turned to her and took her breasts into his hands and kneaded the warm fur. She turned on her stomach and stretched as he ran his hands down her back. When she stretched her arms out he could see her long claws unsheathed, claws at least two inches long with points like daggers, but he was not alarmed. He worked over her fur and ran his hand down her long tail, which twitched at his touch.

By the firelight he could see she had deep green eyes like Mesong's, but no long hair. Pointed ears rose

straight up from her head. He scratched the cat woman between the ears much as he had Ling-Ling and she worked her body against him, warming him with the touch of her fur. Then she stood again and lifted him as if he were a small child, setting him down on the pallet so that he stood on his knees. She back against him on all fours with her tail in the air, looking back at him with fire-lit green eyes. Chang put his arms around her waist and grabbed handfuls of soft fur and entered her, the cat-woman let out a long wail of pleasure. As he moved she began to purr, and Chang could feel the deep vibrations run through him and settle in his chest. Her claws raked at the bedding until she could stand it no longer, and as she let out a long, high scream, Chang let himself go as well. He fell asleep with his face buried in the soft fur of her breasts.

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Chang woke before dawn and immediately shook his head to try to clear the memory of the strange dream. He was surprised that he did not feel the awful grief that he had felt before. Perhaps the dream was his reward, he thought, for all the hard work he had done in his life. The cat woman had warmed him as Ling-Ling had, and loved him like Mesong. It was a strange and wonderful thing to happen, he thought, but still I miss my wife and my cat. Then he noticed that the silk wedding pillow that he and Mesong had slept on was rent to shreds, and he was at once afraid and delighted. He decided to take his boat out.

As he walked through the waking village he was stopped by one of the other fishermen.

"Chang, did you hear? Did you hear?"

"Hear what?" Chang asked.

"They found the fish merchant dead this morning. He was torn to bits by some kind of animal, a tiger perhaps."

"Karma," was all Chang said, with a bit of a smile. Then he took his little boat out to sea.

From then on Chang took his boat out each morning early, and returned late at night. He inherited Kwok's fleet and became prosperous, but he continued to work hard. He never took another wife and the villagers again talked of his strangeness, for he never showed signs of being lonely. He still took the best of his catch home, usually enough to feed a whole family. They were sure that he must have another cat, perhaps several, because each night they heard long cat-like screams coming from Chang's little house and they listened in curious wonder, because sometimes the cat screams sounded like those of a woman.

**END**